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## Seeing ‘the dark passenger’ – Reflections on the emotional trauma of conducting post-disaster research — [Source link](#)

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1 **Seeing ‘*the dark passenger*’ – reflections on the emotional trauma of**  
2 **conducting post-disaster research**

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12  
13 **ABSTRACT**

14 This paper acknowledges ‘*the [my] dark passenger*’ of emotional vicarious trauma associated  
15 with conducting post-disaster research. Post-disaster research is tightly bounded by ethics and  
16 professional codes of conduct requiring us to be vigilant about the impact of our work on our  
17 *participants*. However, as a disaster researcher, *I* have been affected by vicarious trauma.  
18 ‘Direct personal’ vicarious trauma is where I experienced trauma associated with witnessing  
19 devastation making a professional separation from my objective subjects impossible.  
20 ‘Indirect professional’ vicarious trauma occurred when PhD students and others under my  
21 supervision that I sent to disaster affected places, experienced significant negative emotional  
22 responses and trauma as they interviewed their participants. In these situations, I became  
23 traumatised by my lack of training and reflected on how the emphasis on the participants  
24 came at the expense of the researcher in my care. Limited literature exists that focuses on the  
25 vicarious trauma experienced by researchers, and their supervisors working in post-disaster  
26 places and this paper is a contribution to that body of scholarship. In acknowledging and  
27 exploring the emotions and vicarious trauma of researchers embedded in landscapes of  
28 disaster, it becomes possible for future researchers to pre-empt this phenomenon and to  
29 consider ways that they might manage this.

30  
31 **Keywords:** Disasters, researcher, emotions, vicarious trauma, impacts, responsibility,  
32 vicarious resilience

33

34 **Introduction**

35 Disasters – both natural and non-natural greatly affect societies, disrupting our social and  
36 environmental systems. Disasters shake the foundations of social and community structures,  
37 rip places and communities apart and undo the long socio-cultural histories of communities.  
38 The most conspicuous impacts however, are upon people. Pictures of death, injury, suffering  
39 and loss generate powerful emotional responses and remind us that, as Will Durant stated in  
40 relation to natural disasters, “*civilization exists by geological consent, subject to change*  
41 *without notice*” (Durant, 1946).

42

43 As humanity has sprawled out across the Earth’s surface, occupying places subject to the  
44 forces of nature, events that we label ‘hazards’ are inevitable (Dominey-Howes, 2015). The  
45 occurrence of a discrete, potentially hazardous event does not need to result in a disaster.  
46 However, it does seem that disasters occur somewhere around the world on a daily basis.  
47 Disasters occur because of the intersection of *hazard* with *exposed* people and assets that are  
48 *vulnerable* to the hazard (Birkmann et al., 2013). Disasters are usually characterised by a lack  
49 of resilience and adaptive capacity and limited ability to cope and respond. Without  
50 vulnerability there can be no disaster. For me, disasters are a social construct and disasters are  
51 about people. I make no apologies for taking such an anthropocentric view.

52

53 Although contested, a disaster is an event that may be defined as “*a serious disruption of the*  
54 *functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or*  
55 *environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or*  
56 *society to cope using its own resources*” (UNISDR, 2009). As tragic as disasters are, their  
57 occurrence provides intense and important moments of learning. They allow us to investigate  
58 the causes, processes, impacts and consequences of disasters – including on survivors, as well  
59 as how communities respond and recover (Van Zijll de Jong et al., 2011). From these new  
60 understandings, those tasked with the responsibility of disaster risk reduction, may advance  
61 new methods, strategies and techniques for safeguarding us in the future. Over the years, a  
62 plethora of academic disciplines have become involved in pre- and post-disaster research  
63 including but not limited to, geographers, sociologists, geologists, engineers, historians,  
64 political scientists, economists, atmospheric scientists, disaster managers, ecologists,  
65 mathematicians and health experts. Each of these academic disciplines provides unique and  
66 important insights.

67

68 I am a *Geographer* by training and my interests and expertise lie in investigating the  
69 intersections between the hazards originating within the physical earth system and the socio-  
70 cultural contexts in which hazard events trigger disasters. My work is informed by, and  
71 follows a long scholarship of disaster geography exemplified by experts such as Gilbert  
72 White, Susan Cutter, David Alexander and others. The goal of my work is to reduce the  
73 losses associated with disasters by enhancing community resilience through the development  
74 of appropriate disaster risk reduction strategies. To do this, it is necessary for my team and I  
75 to visit disaster affected places. Sometimes this occurs immediately after a event has occurred  
76 – perhaps as part of a larger post-disaster assessment team (see for example, Van Zijll de  
77 Jong et al., 2011) and sometimes this occurs weeks, months and years later for a variety of  
78 reasons (see for example, Méheux et al., 2010). We often interview survivors and  
79 stakeholders such as emergency response personnel, NGO volunteers, community leaders  
80 and the business sector all of whom contribute in various ways, to response and recovery  
81 efforts.

82

83 Before we can depart for a disaster-affected place, we are required to complete a variety of  
84 administrative and bureaucratic tasks designed to keep us safe from risks and physical harm  
85 and to ensure we abide by appropriate domestic and international standards and rules. These  
86 include for example, applying for authority to travel, fieldwork risk assessments, travel and  
87 research visas and so on. Since so much of our work focuses on the experiences of people,  
88 humans are often the subjects of our research. Consequently, and appropriately so, we are  
89 required to complete extensive documentation to gain Human Ethics approval from our  
90 university Ethics Committees. This tightly controls our work and demands rigorous  
91 professional codes of conduct (Dowling, 2010).

92

93 The process of applying for Human Ethics approval to survey and interview people in pre-  
94 and post-disaster situations whilst complex, is extremely valuable since we are obligated to  
95 identify the types of questions we wish to ask, the themes we want to explore and as such,  
96 what methods are appropriate and the likely consequences of our actions (Dowling, 2010;  
97 Dunn, 2010). Specifically, where human subjects have experienced and survived disaster, the  
98 ethics application process requires that we document how we will be mindful of the potential  
99 negative effects our questioning will have on our participants, how we might prevent this  
100 from occurring, and what we will do to ameliorate such negative affects should they occur.  
101 The emphasis is always on us to protect the participant from any further emotional turmoil

102 and we are required to constantly be vigilant about the impacts and effects of our  
103 interviewing on our participants. I have gained Ethics approval for such work in four  
104 universities that I have worked at in my post-PhD career. Interestingly, on not one occasion  
105 has the documentation I have completed noted that ‘I’ the researcher might experience  
106 unsettling emotional responses to the work, or that I might experience some form of  
107 traumatic response. Never has the process asked me what I might do to anticipate and  
108 monitor for emotional trauma working with such material or what I might do to protect  
109 myself from emotional harm. Interestingly, casual conversations with colleagues who do  
110 similar work at other universities, reveal that they have not been advised of the possibility of  
111 negative emotional responses to their field-based post-disaster research either. Thus this lack  
112 of focus on researcher trauma seems rather wide spread.

113

114 In practicing a form of critical reflexivity defined as “*a process of constant, self-conscious*  
115 *scrutiny of the self as researcher and of the research process*” (England (1994) cited in  
116 Dowling (2010: 31)) as we are required to do as researchers (Israel and Hay, 2006) and  
117 specifically, reflecting upon my personal experiences and those of my team working in  
118 disaster-affected places, I have realised that I have struggled with complex and difficult  
119 emotions. I have also been affected by vicarious trauma. Over and over, a ‘*dark passenger*’  
120 has accompanied me on this research and it is time to acknowledge this both as a form of  
121 catharsis and to reassure others that may experience similar reactions.

122

123 In light of this introduction and the fact that a limited literature exists that focuses on the  
124 traumatic experiences of academics that do research in *post-disaster places*, my aim is to  
125 reflect on my own experiences with vicarious trauma as a disaster researcher in order to  
126 contribute to a widening knowledge base. Whilst my intention here is to reflect on my own  
127 experiences, I acknowledge that my reflection and contribution rests alongside a developing  
128 body of scholarship that includes interesting work by amongst others. For example, Lund  
129 (2012) who through a reflection of crisis research with Sri Lankans affected by tsunami and  
130 conflict unpacked the complex of emotions impacting the researcher and the research  
131 process. In undertaking post-2011 earthquake research in Christchurch, New Zealand,  
132 Hutcheson (2013) drew on geographical literature and psychoanalytic concepts to examine  
133 how unconscious, subconscious and embodied experiences can inform research interactions  
134 between researcher and the researched.

135

136 I begin by briefly detailing what is meant by vicarious trauma and how it relates to the  
137 ‘researcher’ – thus focusing on the researcher as subject. Next I examine both the value and  
138 challenges to researchers of doing research in disaster-affected places, drawing on examples  
139 of others. I then acknowledge the *emotions* faced by PhD candidates new to the research  
140 journey drawing upon recent higher education literature. This is useful because it provides a  
141 foundation upon which we may extend recognition of the emotional and traumatic affects of  
142 undertaking post-disaster research. Next I outline my own experiences of vicarious trauma,  
143 describing both ‘direct personal’ and ‘indirect professional’ vicarious trauma. The paper  
144 concludes with a discussion and explores ways in which vicarious trauma might be  
145 anticipated and can be prepared for by those who will engage in such professional activities.

146

#### 147 **What is vicarious trauma and how can it affect researchers?**

148 Eriksen and Ditrich (this issue) note that vicarious trauma has been defined as “*the response*  
149 *of those persons who have witnessed, been subject to explicit knowledge of or, had the*  
150 *responsibility to intervene in a seriously distressing or tragic event*” (Lerias and Byrne,  
151 2003). Dickson-Swift et al., (2010) define vicarious trauma as “*the normal response of*  
152 *researchers who have engaged with traumatic stories of ..... survivors, and as a result often*  
153 *feel distress, distrustful, disconnected and unable to manage their feelings or behaviour*”. For  
154 a more nuanced exploration of the definition and occurrence of vicarious trauma, their  
155 impacts on the professional and coping mechanisms, interested readers are referred to  
156 seminal work of McCann and Pearlman (1990).

157

158 Vicarious trauma occurs when for example, a researcher interviewing disaster survivors,  
159 experiences a negative psycho-emotional response to the traumatic experiences of their  
160 subjects. The condition is associated with numerous negative symptoms. Vicarious trauma  
161 can be very disabling, causing interruptions to sleep patterns, loss of appetite, increased  
162 anxiety and inability to concentrate, increased stress, emotional outbursts, inability to cope,  
163 incapacity to think, write and process research data and, in extreme cases, psychological  
164 breakdown (McCann and Pearlman, 1990). The implications for the researcher are both  
165 obvious, and profound. Whilst I am focusing on the process of vicarious trauma in relation to  
166 researchers dealing with disasters, I acknowledge that vicarious trauma has been extensively  
167 examined elsewhere in relation to those that deal with traumatic events and material. For  
168 example, McCann and Pearlman (1990) explore the issue in relation to psychologists  
169 assisting patients, Gibbons *et al.*, (2014) deals with military personnel and McFarlane and

170 Raphael, 1984; Chopko and Schwartz, 2009) deals with emergency service first responders to  
171 name just a few. Vicarious trauma may also occur (and be studied) in relation to  
172 extraordinarily traumatic events such as the 9/11 terror attacks in New York (Greenall and  
173 Marselle, 2007).

174

175 A number of factors can contribute to the onset of vicarious trauma in the researcher  
176 including previous occurrences of trauma experienced by the researcher (predisposing them  
177 to experiencing trauma in the new post-disaster research context), extended periods of  
178 exposure (e.g., as would occur during long periods of intense field work in the disaster-  
179 affected place), the absence of support networks (which is likely for the researcher who  
180 travels to a place that may be far distant from home), age and gender (younger people are  
181 more likely to be affected and woman are reported to experience greater vicarious trauma  
182 than men) amongst others (Eriksen and Ditrich, this issue). Very significantly, because  
183 vicarious traumatisation may occur at a ‘relatively low intensity’ as opposed to the direct  
184 experiences of those affected by disaster, researchers developing vicarious trauma may not  
185 realise that this is actually happening at all. If you do not know or recognise what is  
186 happening, it is extremely difficult to manage the condition.

187

188 Importantly, Eriksen and Ditrich (this issue) note:

189

190 *“the stories narrated by disaster survivors are often elaborate, filled with suspense and*  
191 *emotionally charged. It should therefore come as no surprise that researchers with whom*  
192 *these stories are shared could be vicariously traumatised. Yet, while there are extensive*  
193 *accounts and analysis of vicarious trauma amongst, for example, mental health professionals*  
194 *and emergency service personnel, there are no studies to date, to our knowledge, that*  
195 *explicitly deal with vicarious trauma amongst academic researchers who specifically work*  
196 *with individuals and communities directly impacted by natural disasters”*

197

198 Van Zijll de Jong et al., (2011) made very similar observations. This paper and this *Special*  
199 *Issue* are an effort to redress this gap.

200

### 201 **Why do [post-] disaster research?**

202 As already mentioned, when disasters occur, they provide intense and important moments of  
203 learning. They provide a fresh canvas of new data that allows researchers to advance existing,

204 and develop new concepts and theories in their respective disciplines and to peer in to the  
205 underlying processes that relate to causes and effects of disasters. Our efforts also contribute  
206 to documenting the needs of survivors so government resources may be effectively  
207 distributed (Van Zijll de Zong et al., 2011). They also challenge us as professionals.

208

209 For example, Sloan (2008) describes how following Hurricane Katrina's impact on South  
210 Mississippian communities in 2005, oral historians from the Center for Oral History and  
211 Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi set out to document the impacts,  
212 effects and experiences of Katrina on local people and communities. This was an unusual  
213 activity for oral historians unaccustomed to such research so soon after an event. He notes:

214

215 *“the human story of Hurricane Katrina, much like the storm itself, is difficult to comprehend*  
216 *in simple terms ..... although interviewing post-Hurricane Katrina presents many challenges*  
217 *and concerns, it also presents great potential to researchers”* (Sloan, 2008: 178)

218

219 He goes on to note:

220

221 *“in working between tragedy and memory there are many considerations such as the*  
222 *ubiquitous truth that the experience is raw. Devastation, both emotional and physical, is*  
223 *palpable.... People are hurting, confused, and unsettled. Composure is often elusive and*  
224 *emotions can be overpowering.... There are ethical issues involved, from discounting loss to*  
225 *compounding grief. It is an invasive exercise..... Working at such moments requires more of*  
226 *us as professionals”* (Sloan, 2008: 178)

227

228 These quotations demonstrate both the professional responsibility that he and his colleagues  
229 felt about the need to document and give voice to the experiences of the survivors and the  
230 difficulties they experienced. It was a critical time when alternative metanarratives about  
231 deserving and undeserving victims of Katrina abounded within political and media debates in  
232 the United States, and giving real people affected by the disaster a voice in history mattered.  
233 What is also clear from these quotes is the *emotional context* of the interviews both for the  
234 participants and the researchers and that the process was demanding both in terms of  
235 methodological approach and sheer affect. None-the-less, the effort was worth it. My  
236 personal view is that no matter how hard the process of conducting post-disaster research  
237 with human subjects is on us as academic professionals, no matter how many logistic,



238 methodological or personal challenges are confronted, we have an ethical, moral and social  
239 duty to undertake such work since we can give voice and meaning to those that have  
240 experienced the disaster.

241

242 In an interesting description of working as a researcher in a post-disaster context in Samoa in  
243 2009 after a large earthquake and tsunami (Goff and Dominey-Howes, 2011), Parkes (2011)  
244 observes that post-disaster situations present many complex obstacles to researchers working  
245 in these spaces:

246

247 *“The prevailing emotional state of survivors following a disaster of grief, shock and fear*  
248 *imposes ethical constraints on conducting research..... In the environment of ongoing*  
249 *trauma and waning tolerance for outsiders, fieldwork conducted in affected regions requires*  
250 *unique methodological approach..... while respecting ethical concerns....”* (Parkes, 2011: 30,  
251 31)

252

253 Interestingly, Parkes reports on the need for flexible, responsive and sensitive field method  
254 approaches to working with disaster survivors that are aware of and reactive to their highly  
255 charged emotional states. Parkes notes in depth how she carefully monitored the emotional  
256 states of her participants so as to direct interview conversations away from unnecessary  
257 trauma and excessive emotion. However, she does not refer to the emotional states of herself  
258 as a researcher. She also acknowledges that as a white woman outsider, she ‘imagined’ that  
259 for the locals she would be considered just like other white outsiders – specifically journalists  
260 with a different set of agendas, ethics and interests rather than on documenting their  
261 experiences.

262

### 263 **Emotions as a regular part of the research process for PhD students and early career** 264 **researchers**

265 Within the field of higher education studies and pedagogy, it is understood and  
266 acknowledged that undertaking a higher degree such as a PhD is a very difficult task (Christie  
267 et al., 2008; Herman, 2010; Dowling et al., 2012). However, as Cotterall (2013) observes:

268

269 *“while the epistemological and ontological challenges faced by doctoral candidates are well*  
270 *documented, the same cannot be said of the emotional dimensions of the journey.....*  
271 *Doctoral study involves many challenges.... PhD students experience a rollercoaster of*

272 *confidence and emotions..... It may be that little is said about the emotional dimensions of*  
273 *PhD research because of the academy's distrust of emotion or the fear of discussing*  
274 *students' feelings might morph into a concern for the therapeutic rather than the pedagogic.*  
275 *There is evidence that PhD students suppress their emotions, yet the emotional aspects of*  
276 *research practice and the formation of a scholarly identity are deeply embedded in being a*  
277 *successful doctoral student” (Cotterall, 2013: 174)*

278

279 Emotions influence our perceptions and thinking, affect our ability to motivate action and  
280 communicate and can be powerful forces in driving us [and the doctoral candidate] to  
281 completion (Cotterall, 2013; Thompson and Walker, 2010; Willis 2012). In light of this, it is  
282 critical that we allow ourselves as PhD students and supervisors to be aware of, and sensitive  
283 to, these emotional moments in the research journey. This is because they are so implicit in  
284 the formation of confidence related to understanding the theoretical bounds of our work, the  
285 data we collect and analyse and how we convey their meaning through writing and other  
286 forms of communication. Ignoring or denying them may threaten our professional  
287 development and the integrity of the research data.

288

289 Cotterall (2013) observes that in the humanities, emotions have been considered in two  
290 separate ways yet remarkably, both are relevant to the emotions researchers encounter whilst  
291 working with human subjects in post-disaster contexts. The first is inherent, or biological and  
292 neurological, where the emotional state experienced is considered as a physiological response  
293 to a stimulus. The other, socially constructed, is that emotions reflect responses to the social,  
294 cultural, historical and political context in which they are produced and experienced (Lupton,  
295 1998).

296

297 However, emotions – especially during stressful times such as data collection in the field  
298 after a disaster – can also inhibit thinking leading to anxiety impacting on the researcher's  
299 capacity to make sense of the experiences they are researching *and* experiencing. Whilst  
300 Cotterall's paper does not deal with PhD research experiences or emotions in post-disaster  
301 research contexts, it does serve as an important reminder that we must, as supervisors, be  
302 aware of and sensitive to the potential emotional experiences of our PhD candidates.

303

304 Whilst the preceding comments related to the emotional stress felt by PhD students struggling  
305 with their research, they may very well equally apply to early career researchers newly

306 qualified from their PhD. In many instances, young academics are particularly keen to ensure  
307 that having graduated with their PhD, they can indeed work effectively as a researcher. They  
308 are eager to demonstrate their capability and to please their new employers or grant funding  
309 agency [I must succeed, I must succeed!]. In many instances, it is reasonable to expect that  
310 they likewise stress and wrestle emotionally with their field experiences.

311

### 312 **Reflections on my experiences with vicarious trauma**

313 Critical self-reflection as researchers is important for a variety of reasons (Chacko, 2004;  
314 Dowling, 2010; Hutcheson, 2013; Mistry et al., 2009; Rose, 1997). Over the years I have  
315 come to realise that I have been affected by vicarious trauma in two ways. The first is what I  
316 term as ‘direct personal’ vicarious trauma. In this case I personally have experienced trauma  
317 associated with witnessing the devastation first hand making a professional separation from  
318 my objective subjects impossible. Through repeated interviews and community consultations,  
319 the experiences of others have impacted me personally. The second has been ‘indirect  
320 professional’ vicarious trauma. In this latter case, I have sent PhD research students, research  
321 assistants and Post-Doctoral Fellows out to communities affected by disaster as part of their  
322 research project journeys or as staff working on projects that I hold grants for. In many cases,  
323 those under my care have experienced personal trauma as they interviewed their participants  
324 – sometimes calling back seeking counselling, support, guidance and coached relief from the  
325 horrors of their daily research experience. In these situations, I became traumatised by my  
326 own lack of training and reflected on how the emphasis on the participants came at the  
327 expense of the researcher.

328

#### 329 *An example of ‘direct personal’ vicarious trauma*

330 In almost every post-disaster affected place I have worked in I have experienced some form  
331 of ‘direct personal vicarious trauma’. However, my first, and still most significant  
332 experience, relates to when I assisted in a post-disaster search and rescue mission. On 17<sup>th</sup>  
333 August 1999, a magnitude 7.4 earthquake impacted northwest Turkey. This event is known  
334 as the Izmit earthquake and it was extremely devastating (Schiermeier, 1999).

335

336 My PhD training had been as a physical geographer looking at geological and archaeological  
337 records of past tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that had affected coastal sites in  
338 the Aegean Sea region of Greece from the Bronze Age period to the recent (Dominey-Howes,  
339 2004; Dominey-Howes, 1996). As a physical geographer my training had taught me to

340 examine and interrogate rocks and sediments. There was no space for me to focus on people  
341 and the associated myriad research issues and challenges.

342

343 At the time of the Izmit earthquake, I was working as an early career academic and Project  
344 Officer within the Coventry Centre for Disaster Management, at Coventry University in the  
345 UK. I was just three years out of my PhD. This was a tremendous opportunity in that it  
346 allowed me to broaden my teaching and research interests and skills especially given the  
347 Centre was multidisciplinary and comprised experts from all areas of disaster studies. The  
348 Centre worked closely with the World Health Organisation (WHO) through an arrangement  
349 with one of its regional offices and my colleagues and I had many opportunities to participate  
350 in a variety of projects related to contemporary disaster processes, planning, response and  
351 recovery under the umbrella of the WHO.

352

353 Following the Izmit earthquake, I had the opportunity to work as part of a team observing and  
354 assessing the effectiveness of search and rescue activities on the ground. Eventually, rather  
355 than simply observing, I became involved in the physical process of searching for and  
356 rescuing people trapped within collapsed buildings. This takes a remarkable set of skills and I  
357 became involved in this activity following some discussion between the WHO, the agency I  
358 was assigned to and specific search and rescue teams working on the ground. I was given this  
359 opportunity as part of my 'ongoing professional development'. The particular case of  
360 relevance here is that we were focused on a residential building where it was known that a  
361 five-year old girl was trapped. Her cries could be heard whilst we worked. We laboured for  
362 more than 24 hours carefully shifting the debris to reach the girl. It was difficult work. As we  
363 worked the little girls' cries became quieter and in the last hours before we reached her, she  
364 fell silent.

365

366 When our team eventually lifted the last broken beam of debris and uncovered the small  
367 space the little girl had been confined to, we discovered she had died from her injuries.

368

369 Again, it was decided that as part of my professional development, that together with a  
370 Turkish colleague who would act as my interpreter, I would return the body of the girl to her  
371 family. Her parents had remained very close throughout the search and rescue mission and  
372 were aware we had clearly reached their daughter. We wrapped the little girl in a blanket

373 being careful to cover her whole body and head. She was placed in my arms and together  
374 with my colleague, I walked the few metres to where the parents were waiting.

375

376 I was at that moment completely overwhelmed with emotion.

377

378 Even now, the actions of recollection and reviewing my field notebook transport me back to  
379 that moment – it was and still is, filled with raw emotion. As I looked the mother in her eyes  
380 and returned her daughter to her, she asked me one simple question. Why? I hesitated  
381 thinking in my junior inexperience that some response about the shear strength of and failure  
382 in rocks subject to sustained tectonic pressure might be appropriate but oddly, and  
383 fortunately, the emotion that had seized my entire body prevented me from saying anything at  
384 all. Tears filled my eyes. I struggled to stop myself from completely breaking down. I could  
385 not possibly imagine the pain and heartbreak she felt as a mother yet at the same time, I was  
386 completely traumatised by this loss and my response was intensely emotional. I am  
387 struggling as I type these words at my desk. I remember every pained wrinkle on her face, the  
388 sounds of the activity going on close to us. I recall the smells of the devastation of the town  
389 outside, I am there right now and I am wrestling with my emotions.

390

391 There was a challenge here for me professionally in that I had been told I was to try and  
392 avoid showing emotion. I was instructed to remain professional and focus on the task that  
393 needed to be done. I was told that as a westerner I should not try and demonstrate sensitivity  
394 to the moment because I was an outsider. However, I felt like I should show this woman that  
395 I understood, I cared, I was sorry, I was affected by her grief and trauma as well but I did not  
396 know how to ‘step along a delicate line’ between going against the advice I had been given  
397 and an internal dialogue I had about not appearing cold and insensitive. This is an ongoing  
398 issue for me when working with individuals affected by disaster, especially in cross-cultural  
399 settings where as Cotterall (2013) notes:

400

401 *“One important aspect of the social-historical context in which emotions are produced is*  
402 *culture. Cross-cultural psychologists have identified significant cultural variations in*  
403 *emotions. These include differences in the rules that govern the display and expression of*  
404 *emotions and in the ways that events are interpreted”* (Cotterall, 2013: 176)

405

406 I have vivid recollection up to the moment that the mother took possession of her daughter's  
407 body but not much that happened in the minutes and hours after. Given I was working with  
408 the WHO, I was lucky and did have access to psychologists as part of the general relief  
409 efforts and I was able to get two 15 minute sessions in the field to discuss how I was coping  
410 and feeling. I felt great embarrassment that I needed to discuss my feelings about the horror  
411 and devastation and loss around me when I was just an observer. I also felt like a bit of a  
412 failure. I ought to be stronger, more able to cope, harder, so to speak. I was not. I was a mess.  
413 I remained in the field assisting and observing for another ten days and throughout this  
414 period, I recall wanting to talk all the time to my colleagues and the psychologists about how  
415 I was feeling and coping or not, and how my experiences were disturbing my dreams and  
416 causing me to cry in the privacy and security of my accommodation. I felt guilty the whole  
417 time. I wanted to take time out to workshop through my emotions and the impacts of what I  
418 was doing on me but I could not because others – the actual real victims – were experiencing  
419 so much more grief and loss. Who was I to claim I was experiencing grief as well? My field  
420 notebook records:

421

422 *".....it's so terrible..... can't stop crying. Why am I so affected? I haven't lost anything. I*  
423 *can leave anytime and return home. These people are trapped here. Why am I so*  
424 *overwhelmed..... How are they coping when I'm not?....."*

425

426 On returning home, I organised counselling through my employer and several sessions  
427 enabled me to make some sense of my experiences. Interestingly, even back in 1999 the  
428 counsellor advised that I should write about this professionally since it was, we felt, an  
429 important issue. As I write, I am aware that the process of recalling this event transports me  
430 back to that very moment and that it is still intense and unsettling. I am able to access the  
431 memory, recall it, relive it and it affects me intensely. Similarly, Sloan (2008) tells the story  
432 of driving to Columbus, Mississippi in early 2006 as part of the work of the Center for Oral  
433 History and Cultural Heritage to interview a Mrs Pope who was 100 at the time of the  
434 interview. Mrs Pope had survived the 1927 Mississippi Flood as well as Hurricane Katrina.  
435 Powerfully, Sloan relates how *"as Mrs Pope shared her story [of 1927], emotion overcame*  
436 *her. Here, eighty years after the event, she struggled to manage the almost overwhelming*  
437 *emotion – feelings of fear from the flood...."*. This emotive recollection makes sense to me.  
438 My experience was as significant to me as Mrs Pope's was to her.

439

440 *An example of 'indirect professional' vicarious trauma*

441 More recently as I have developed as a researcher, I have been lucky and have obtained a  
442 succession of grants to undertake research in pre- and post-disaster contexts. With these  
443 grants I have either recruited PhD students and/or employed research assistants and early  
444 career Post-Doctoral Research Fellows to assist with the work. Further, I have had students  
445 enrol to undertake PhD programs under my supervision and co-supervision, exploring topics  
446 related to disaster that were their own ideas. In both situations these PhD students and early  
447 career researchers have ended up in the field in many cases, in disaster-affected places.

448

449 On several occasions, those under my care have experienced personal trauma as they  
450 interviewed their participants – sometimes calling back seeking counselling, support,  
451 guidance and coached relief from the horrors of their daily research experience. In these  
452 situations, I became traumatised by my own lack of training and reflected on how the  
453 emphasis on the participants came at the expense of the researcher.

454

455 The most significant example relates to the fieldwork undertaken by a former PhD candidate  
456 – Emma Calgaro (see Calgaro, this issue). By way of context, in 2005, Emma had undertaken  
457 fieldwork in Thailand following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster as part of an  
458 Honours project. I was not involved in her Honours research. After gaining a first class for  
459 that work, Emma enrolled in a PhD and I was privileged enough to become a co-supervisor.  
460 The PhD sought to greatly extend the Honours work and in 2006/07, Emma returned to  
461 Thailand for an extended period of fieldwork.

462

463 The primary supervisor and I kept in regular contact with Emma whilst she was in Thailand.  
464 Weekly telephone and skype conversations and exchanges by email quickly revealed that  
465 Emma was experiencing significant difficulties<sup>1</sup> in managing the research process in a place  
466 she thought she knew and with a community that had given her a particularly positive  
467 experience during her Honours. Things had changed very dramatically between the two  
468 periods of fieldwork.

469

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<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to Emma Calgaro for giving me consent to reflect upon and discuss this situation in this paper. For Emma's more nuanced experiences, see Calgaro (this issue)

470 In early 2007 I visited Emma in Thailand for a week to gain a better understanding of the  
471 field study location and the relevant issues. As we sat over dinner on the first night discussing  
472 how things were going, Emma slowly opened up about the emotional difficulties she was  
473 having and these were very significant. That evening and the remaining week were extremely  
474 emotional for us but a significant revelation came to us that first night when after listening to  
475 Emma speak for some time, I simply stated something along the lines of “*but what your*  
476 *describing sounds like post traumatic stress*”. And in so many ways – that was it. We  
477 instantly realised that a very significant traumatic experience had occurred that was having  
478 profound physical and psychological impact.

479

480 Whilst the revelation was extremely uncomfortable for both of us, it did mean we could begin  
481 to think about what was actually happening and what actions we could undertake to enable  
482 Emma to manage this situation – especially after I left and returned to Australia. Reflecting  
483 on the internal dialog I had with myself whilst in Thailand, I was extremely worried that  
484 given I had no formal training as a psychologist, my attempts at supporting and reassuring  
485 Emma were very inadequate. I was concerned that Emma might be frustrated and angry with  
486 me that I could not provide a magic solution that would solve the problem. I did want to solve  
487 this problem. Being in the field with Emma did appear to provide some comfort and support  
488 but as my departure date neared, I became consumed with fear that once I departed, Emma  
489 might become very overwhelmed and affected by both the emotional and traumatic  
490 experiences. I wondered if I should report this up through our University system, whether we  
491 as supervisors should ‘recall the candidate from the field’ so as appropriate counselling could  
492 be undertaken and so on?

493

494 As a supervisor, I found this process and the lack of protocol either within the University  
495 structure and ethics policies or in the literature to guide me, overwhelming and on reflection,  
496 traumatising. I was not adequately trained for this and if I did not act, acted inappropriately or  
497 inadequately, the well being of the PhD candidate in my care could be profoundly affected  
498 leading to all kinds of terrible outcomes. This was not a good situation to be in. Fortunately,  
499 Emma found a way to work through the situation and her wellbeing and emotions became a  
500 central part of the weekly skype discussions with the supervisory team – sometimes more  
501 important than the research and its data. This refocus on the emotional needs and traumatic  
502 experiences of the candidate provided a valuable space for Emma and us as supervisors to



503 hold the situation together. Emma went on to complete an outstanding piece of valuable  
504 research – a credit to her perseverance and resilience.

505

### 506 **Discussion, ways forward and conclusion**

507 Disasters are by default, devastating. They have significant physical, material, economic and  
508 psycho-social impacts on affected individuals and communities. It is right and appropriate, as  
509 noted by Sultana (2007: 375), that ethical concerns “*permeate the entire process of the*  
510 *research, from conceptualization to dissemination.....*”. That said, research with traumatic  
511 content affects the researcher. It is simply unrealistic to assume that in some way the  
512 researcher can remain totally objective and detached from the content and experience of their  
513 research.

514

515 England (1994: 242) wrote that “*years of positivist-inspired training have taught us that*  
516 *impersonal, neutral detachment is an important criterion for good research*”. It is, but not  
517 being detached, being emotional and affected can also bring great benefits (Caballero, 2014;  
518 Procter, 2013) and as Lund (2012) notes:

519

520 “*researchers who make themselves vulnerable to emotions not only make research more*  
521 *engaging and intelligible, but also provoke reflection*” (Lund, 2012: 94).

522

523 In the context of my experiences, the emotion and trauma have shown me what it is that I  
524 want to do with my research. It has revealed to me a series of questions that have guided me  
525 in the last decade and a half. It has shaped my research agenda and my understanding and  
526 empathy as a researcher. Emotions do influence our perceptions and thinking, they do affect  
527 our ability to motivate action and communicate, and are powerful forces in driving us to  
528 completion (Caballero, 2014). This is certainly the case for me. My emotional reactions – no  
529 matter how painful, have made me determined to see my research to its conclusion. I owe it  
530 to the survivors that have shared their much more traumatic experiences with me. The event  
531 in Turkey was utterly profound for me. This single event was so significant that it caused a  
532 quantum shift in my understanding of disaster and I realised (the light bulb went on) that it  
533 was about people. I understood that processes of vulnerability, power, corruption and so on  
534 were at play. It caused me to start to slowly change the course of my research interests from  
535 exclusively physical earth sciences to social science in disasters.

536

537 As Parkes (2011) argued, doing post-disaster research with human subjects probably requires  
538 a unique methodological approach that is sensitive to the survivors. I contend however, that  
539 this approach must also be sensitive to us as researchers. Van Zijll de Jong et al., (2011) in  
540 their reflections of doing social research in Samoa after the earthquake-tsunami disaster also  
541 referred to ‘sensitive research’ and indicated it is critical to open up methodological  
542 discussion on how to take care of us as researchers undertaking research on sensitive topics in  
543 post-disaster contexts so that we can make sense of issues such as grief, death, mental health  
544 and loss of community. As researchers, we should be aware of professional help groups (such  
545 as University counselling services) available to us and of mutual care and stress management  
546 in post-disaster research (Dyregrov, 1997; Dyregrov et al., 2000; Newhall et al., 1999).

547

548 In Turkey I was also aware that as a ‘man’ I was supposed to be emotionless, strong,  
549 masculine. I wrestled with the idea that if I revealed my emotional state, the dominantly  
550 ‘male group’ around me might question my masculine identity. This question of my  
551 masculine identity has also caused me considerable emotional difficulty throughout my  
552 career. However, this is a whole other issue that warrants careful exploration and discussion  
553 and will be considered elsewhere. That said, I did wish to briefly acknowledge it as a  
554 researcher and note that recent work (including that by Geographers) has begun to explore  
555 the intersection of gender, masculinity, emotions, empathy and how these relate to researcher  
556 positionality and researcher career development (Buzzanell and Turner, 2003; Evans, 2012;  
557 Meth, 2009).

558

559 The last major issue than continues to cause me emotional difficulties is that I recognise as an  
560 employee of a university that is funded by external, highly competitive funding grants, I must  
561 be productive – research productive. I am expected to gather data, analyse it and then publish.  
562 People who experience and survive disaster and then tell me about it are the material that  
563 becomes my next manuscript for publication, are the content of my next grant application.  
564 Their experiences are wrapped up in my desire to get value for money from the grant I hold.  
565 But of course, I also desire recognition from my peers and the promotions process. This  
566 results in a complex of emotions for me that are ongoing. How do I stay true to my subjects  
567 whilst wanting good data for my research and aspirations? I acknowledge that as Van Zijll de  
568 Jong et al., (2011) said, ‘survivors are people not research subjects’.

569

570 In reflecting on the experiences of my PhD students and Post-doctoral research colleagues, I  
571 have become mindful of a process that may well cause significant emotional stress for them  
572 as young researchers. PhD candidates may not wish to discuss their emotional difficulties in  
573 undertaking research because in the current constrained and highly competitive job market of  
574 higher education and research, to get ahead and to secure a job, being emotional and  
575 admitting to struggling with work is at odds with university employers, funding agencies and  
576 promotion committee's who demand output and productivity. Being emotional and  
577 traumatised and admitting that this results in 'perceived or actual lack of productivity' can be  
578 very problematic. As supervisors, we must be sensitive to this and continue to reassure and  
579 guide and support those in our care.

580

581 My post-disaster research with people and in places has resulted in unbearable emotions and  
582 some forms of trauma. This has been a burden – sometimes more obvious to me, sometimes  
583 not. It has however, always been there riding with me like a *dark passenger*. So having  
584 acknowledged and accepted this, the dark passenger riding with me has also fostered a sense  
585 of 'vicarious resilience' (McKinnon, pers. comm, 2014). I may actually be more resilient in  
586 my own life because of my professional experiences.

587

588 *Ways forward?*

589 If it is accepted that researchers can be affected by strong emotions and vicarious trauma,  
590 then this acknowledgement points towards some strategies to manage this. These might  
591 include:

- 592 • university ethics application processes should be modified to explicitly note  
593 such potential emotional and traumatic impacts on researchers and the process  
594 should ask the researcher to identify how they might look after themselves if it  
595 does;
- 596 • researchers and supervisors planning disaster related research, especially post-  
597 disaster work, should discuss openly and honestly the potential impacts that  
598 such research may have on the researcher. In doing this, it at least allows  
599 researchers to think about the circumstances in which they might experience  
600 negative emotional experiences;
- 601 • researchers and their supervisors should communicate regularly once the  
602 researcher has departed and ensure infield debriefs tackle issues of how the

603 researcher is feeling and coping. This is just as important as focusing on the  
604 data and research process;

605 • the researcher going in to a disaster-affected place should also identify  
606 counselling or psychological services that they may utilise themselves should  
607 the need arise;

608 • no matter how tight the timeframe for field based research, the researcher  
609 should think about building ‘time out’ in the research (maybe one to two days  
610 per week) to take a break from the grind of the human research, to give  
611 themselves a reward, to be normal and focused on something else;

612 • phone or skype home regularly to speak to family, loved ones and friends  
613 since this allows the researcher to remain connected to their support network;

614 • consider an alternative research strategy such as working with a more  
615 experienced, older field buddy so that the researcher does not feel alone in the  
616 field;

617 • consider stopping interviews and other activities if the researcher realises that  
618 they are becoming emotional. If necessary, undertake a discrete physical  
619 action to ‘ground the researcher in the moment’ such as looking away or  
620 gently tapping their own hands or knee in order to remind themselves to do  
621 their best to separate from the process of the research in that emotional  
622 moment; and

623 • as part of the research training which includes how to do interviews or surveys  
624 etc, also consider learning meditation or other forms of mindfulness and  
625 relaxation techniques and practice them in order to manage stress.

626

627 These represent very basic suggestions and many others would be appropriate. The point is to  
628 simply start a dialogue within research teams about the possible affects of emotion and  
629 trauma on the researcher.

630

631 In summary, the research with traumatic content explored in this *Special Issue*, including  
632 post-disaster research, is tightly bounded by ethics and professional codes of conduct  
633 requiring us to be vigilant about the impact of our work on our *participants*. However, *I* have  
634 been affected by both ‘direct personal’ and ‘indirect professional’ vicarious trauma. In these  
635 situations, I became traumatised by my lack of training and reflected on how the emphasis on

636 the participants came at the expense of me and those in my care. For some time, ‘a [my] *dark*  
637 *passenger*’ has accompanied me. Whilst the traumatic experiences I have had have not been  
638 easy to live with, they have shaped my professional career and helped me resolve the  
639 questions I have been interested in. Limited literature exists that focuses on the vicarious  
640 trauma experienced by researchers, and their supervisors, working in post-disaster places. In  
641 acknowledging and exploring the emotions and vicarious trauma of researchers embedded in  
642 landscapes of disaster, it becomes possible for future researchers to pre-empt this  
643 phenomenon and to consider ways that they might manage this. I sincerely hope this  
644 reflective personal account is of value to others.

645

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